

# **George W. Bush and his Biographers**

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*The Australian* cartoonist Bill Leak once commented that it is difficult to draw George W. Bush because he is already a “caricature”. A cartoon cut out image of Bush<sup>1</sup> has been popular since he entered the 2000 US presidential race with both Letterman and Leno regularly lampooning his various missteps on their late night comedy shows.<sup>2</sup> Michael Moore, in his best selling books and now in his documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11*,<sup>3</sup> has spread the word to those turned off mainstream media that the president is “a stupid white man”. George W. Bush’s malapropisms and accidental humour has been documented on websites such as Presidentmoron.com and in Jacob Weisberg’s three volumes of “Bushisms”; such vignettes have made their way around the globe via group e-mails to find a place on office walls near and far. Foreign newspapers have lapped it up, enjoying the chance to have some fun at America’s expense. The resulting image for many is a president who is widely seen as a cartoon character: in frame one he is Ronald Reagan the B-grade cowboy, next he is Bonzo the chimpanzee, next he is the simpleton Alfred E. Newman.

Bush at times undoubtedly seems perfectly cast to evoke a series of culturally received caricatures about Texans, Americans and evangelical Christians. His syntax mangling, his “dead or alive” threats to America’s enemies, his talk of “evildoers,”<sup>4</sup> and the public expressions of his evangelical Christian faith all make him a wellspring of negative stereotypes. These critiques however, all too often slide into anti-American,<sup>5</sup> anti-evangelical Christian and anti-Texan ridicule and undercut valid criticisms levelled at Bush and his presidential record. As a result, preconceptions are reinforced and the undeniably flawed Bush escapes proper examination. In part, the cartoon image is the result of the media circus that covers modern politics,<sup>6</sup> with its fixation on personality and contrived conflicts, rather than on policies or in-

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<sup>1</sup> On all occasions when I refer to President Bush or Bush I am referring to the current US president.

<sup>2</sup> Frank Bruni, *Ambling into History* (HarperCollins, 2002) p.56.

<sup>3</sup> A. O. Scott in his review of *Fahrenheit 9/11* wrote, it “has been likened to an op-ed column, it might more accurately be said to resemble an editorial cartoon.” See “Unruly Scorn Leaves Room for Restraint, but not a lot”, *New York Times*, 23 June, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Peter and Rochelle Schweizer write that Bush’s reference “to the terrorists and their sponsors as ‘evildoers’” was drawn from his practice of “reading from the Bible in the morning”, something that “influenced his actions and words.” Shortly after 9/11, he “woke up and read a passage from Proverbs 21:15. ‘When justice is done, it brings joy to the righteous but terror to evildoers.’” Peter Schweizer and Rochelle Schweizer, *The Bushes: Portrait of a Dynasty* (DoubleDay, 2004) p. 517.

<sup>5</sup> Brendon O’Connor, “A Brief History of Anti-Americanism” *Australian Journal of American Studies*, Vol 23, July 2004.

<sup>6</sup> See Bruni, p.14-15

depth analysis.<sup>7</sup> It is also the continuation of what President Clinton called “the politics of personal destruction”<sup>8</sup> or “politics by other means” as it was dubbed by political scientists Ginsberg and Shafer. Before I sound entirely humourless, I acknowledge that on one level the comic response to Bush is understandable given the regular absurdity and intransigence of American politics. At times, if one did not laugh one would cry. Moreover, critical humour is a useful way of undercutting the self-righteousness of politicians, and of drawing issues to the attention of those put off by conventional political debates and commentary.<sup>9</sup> However, an over reliance on the pantomime creates a situation where the play is mistaken for the reality and where depth is forsaken for cheap laughs.

Faced with these dilemmas, the academic in me is drawn to offering a more nuanced understanding of George W. Bush’s political background and persona. Contempt for Bush’s path to power and his policies make it difficult for many commentators to write objectively about the current US president with the descent of much commentary into thinly veiled abuse or clichés leaving us intellectually poorer. With his re-election campaign looming, a more fulsome portrait of Bush seems desirable to ward off another round of such cliché-riddled commentary. When searching for more genuine understandings of political leaders, people regularly turn to biographies in the hope that they will reveal the authentic or real person. This draws on a belief that a leader’s “past is prologue” as David Maraniss – the Clinton biographer – likes to say. Furthermore, it is often suggested that the true character of a politician will be revealed by the nature of his or her past actions and decisions. In other words, patterns will be discernable that will allow us to make judgements about a person’s essential character and their future behaviour. Burdened by such expectations, biographies often disappoint us in this search for the truth: people turn out to be more unpredictable, secretive and allusive than biographers, and readers, hope. The classic example of this is Edmund Morris’ authorised biography of Ronald Reagan – *Dutch* – in which Morris ends up inventing imaginary characters to better describe the allusive inner life of a so-called simple soul. To add to the confusion, there is the challenge of multiple interpretations of personal histories particularly when biographers start mining the pasts of significant and

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<sup>7</sup> Molly Ivins and Lou Dubose, *Bushwhacked: Life in George W. Bush’s America* (Allison & Busby, 2004) p. xi

<sup>8</sup> Joe Conason and Gene Lyons, *The Hunting of the President* (Thomas Dunne Books, 2000)

<sup>9</sup> Brendon O’Connor, “Bush-bashing” *Griffith Review*, Spring, 2004.

partisan figures such as US presidents.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, over time, dominant narratives do emerge to shape public perceptions and expectations about leaders with George W. Bush being no exception. During an individual's presidency the biographical literature struggles to compete with the images promoted in the popular press, but over time the best biographical accounts and material comes to the fore. The importance of Lou Cannon's chronology of Ronald Reagan's life and the influence of Skinner et al's *Reagan in his own hand* in shaping debates about the personal merits and demerits of Reagan the man,<sup>11</sup> would seem to affirm this assertion. Bush is likely to undergo a similar process to Reagan, with biographers adding depth to the caricature of Bush as a simpleton.

The dominant narrative which emerges from the early Bush biographies is of a former president's son, a born-again Christian and a Texan. These three themes will be recounted and explored in this paper to offer an in-depth account of George W. Bush's background and political style. The fact that Bush is the son of a former president will long be a historical curio, placing him alongside John Quincy Adams. However, more significantly for our concerns here, being the grandson of a Senator and the son of a president – who he closely assisted in the 1988 campaign<sup>12</sup> – should be a tremendous advantage. Whether George W. actually gained any insight into the presidency from his privileged position is something most biographical accounts have curiously little to say about; this is possibly because the 41<sup>st</sup> and 43<sup>rd</sup> US presidents are generally seen as opposites, with their instincts and natures often painted as dissimilar. George W.'s relationship with his father is shaped by both the advantages of being a Bush, and a personal want to prove his father's expectations wrong; it is a more complex relationship than might be assumed as well as being a key insight into the

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<sup>10</sup> The overtly partisan Bush biographies tend to either depict Bush as a lightweight who has ridden his family name for all it has been worth – Molly Ivins' and Lou Dubose's *Shrub* (Vintage, 2000); Kevin Phillips' *American Dynasty* (Viking, 2004); J.H. Hatfield's *Fortunate Son* (Soft Skull Press, 2001) – or a decisive and humorous politician who connects instinctively with Texans, and Americans – George W. Bush's *A Charge to Keep* (William Morrow and Co, 1999); Karen Hughes' *Ten Minutes from Normal* (Viking, 2004); John Podhoretz's *Bush Country* (St Martin's Press, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> Brendon O'Connor, "Back to the future, again", *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol 47, No. 4, 2001.

<sup>12</sup> Bush was part of his father's 1988 campaign staff and worked closely with the campaign director Lee Atwater (Bill Minutaglio, *First Son* (Three Rivers Press, 2001) pp. 217-218, 260). George W. H. Bush's 1988 campaign in general and Atwater's tactics in particular have been criticised as the "dirtiest" in living memory (see Sidney Blumenthal, *Pledging Allegiance* (HarperPerennial, 1991); Brendon O'Connor, *A Political History of the American Welfare System* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2004) pp. 167-173).

motivations and character of the current US president. Exploring the biographical themes of Bush's evangelical Christianity and his relationship with Texas will also bring us closer to an authentic understanding of Bush.

### **The Son of a President**

Although the Bushes have arguably enjoyed more electoral success at the highest level than any other American family – including the Kennedy clan – surprisingly little has been written about Bush family dynamics.<sup>13</sup> This can be partly explained by the famed loyalty and secrecy of the family as well as their general reluctance to engage in introspection about themselves or family relations.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the Bushes are members of secret societies, George Bush Snr was Director of the CIA, and Barbara Bush has a zero tolerance policy on family members gossiping about personal family affairs with the press.<sup>15</sup>

Despite these challenges, a couple of biographers have placed George W. Bush's relationship with his father at the centre of their analysis with most of the 2000 election cycle biographies on Bush having "son" or "dynasty" in their titles. Bill Minutaglio's *First Son* offers the best insights into the father/son relationship. Minutaglio draws on interviews with a wide range of people close to Bush,<sup>16</sup> and benefits from Minutaglio's many years of experience covering Texan politics as a journalist for papers such as the *Houston Chronicle* and *Dallas Morning News*. Unlike the straighter retelling of the Bush story by Elizabeth Mitchell and Nicolas Lemann, Minutaglio is more willing to be somewhat – though not wildly – speculative about the relationship to suggest how the pressures and expectations placed on George W. manifested into both rebellion and a want to emulate the feats of his father. The stream of consciousness style of Minutaglio's opening chapter might turn some scholars off but placed in the context of the entire book, it reads as an interesting literary device to summarise Bush's tensions with his father and to illustrate just how far the younger Bush has come. Given the secrecy of the family and the disdain for being psychoanalysed – "Don't stretch me out on the couch"<sup>17</sup> the first president Bush would say – it is quite understandable

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<sup>13</sup> Schweizer and Schweizer, p. xiii.

<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Mitchell, *W Revenge of the Bush Dynasty* (Hyperion, 2000) p. 57; Minutaglio pp. 6, 152, 311, 312, 318.

<sup>15</sup> Schweizer and Schweizer, p. xiii.

<sup>16</sup> Minutaglio, p. viii.

<sup>17</sup> Minutaglio, p. 318.

why Minutaglio is drawn to such speculations in a book that principally offers solid reportage on Bush's life. The more recent *The Bushes* (2004) by Peter and Rochelle Schweizer – which also draws on interviews with members of the Bush family – adds to the picture offered by Minutaglio with its descriptions of how the Bush family milieu shaped George W.'s life and career, although many of the insights come from the one source, Bush's cousin, the journalist John Ellis.

Undoubtedly the reputation and contacts of his father helped George W. Bush gain entry into educational institutions, the National Guard, jobs, sources of money, and political opportunities; however, one gets a sense that their relationship, although supportive,<sup>18</sup> was often distant and at times testy.<sup>19</sup> Expectations weighed heavily on George W., and his response for a good deal of his life was to act contrary to his father's very proper and upright example. The young George W. displayed a fair degree of a classic childhood rebellion, at times "brazenly tugging at the leash"<sup>20</sup> as Minutaglio puts it. Bush's personality is often described as much more similar to his less diplomatic and sharp-tongued mother.<sup>21</sup> Although he followed his father's path from Andover through Yale, the Air Force, the Midland oil industry, Texas electoral politics, and finally to the presidency, George W.'s enthusiasm for East Coast elite society and its institutions has often been rather different from his father's, and consequentially, so has his relationship with Texas. Throughout his life, George W. has been most comfortable in Texas,<sup>22</sup> although he has been drawn to the East Coast to live up to his family name and aspirations.

In his twenties Bush had much less direction and apparent drive than his multitalented father<sup>23</sup> – or even his younger brother Jeb Bush. However, it is worth noting that Bush did complete an MBA at Harvard during his so-called wayward twenties. Reflecting on this period, Bush told David Maraniss that he was trying to "reconcile who I was and who my dad was, to establish my own identity in my own

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<sup>18</sup> Bush, p. 6-7.

<sup>19</sup> Minutaglio, pp. 327, 337; Schweizer and Schweizer; Mitchell; Podhoretz.

<sup>20</sup> Minutaglio, p. 337.

<sup>21</sup> Minutaglio, pp. 100, 159; Schweizer and Schweizer.

<sup>22</sup> This comfort with living in Texas is a theme throughout Bush's life (Minutaglio, p. 290), which has continued through to his presidency. When he wants to form stronger bonds with foreign leaders, Bush's favourite meeting place is his ranch in Crawford, Texas.

<sup>23</sup> Mitchell goes as far as calling George H. W. Bush "superman" in her book due to his sporting skills, war record, charm, business sense and political career (see Mitchell, p. 10-29).

way.”<sup>24</sup> The relationship between “Big George” and “Little George” often cast a long shadow over George W. As John Ellis has suggested, “being the son of George Herbert Walker Bush in Texas is like being the son of Tiger Woods in a golf community.”<sup>25</sup> George Bush Jr did not always seem to enjoy this pressure and as a result he “had mastered the art of minimizing expectations early in life so he could avoid direct comparison with his father.”<sup>26</sup>

Much has been made of Bush’s decision after his fortieth birthday to give up drinking alcohol after which he became more focused and more committed to his religious faith.<sup>27</sup> The relationship between these two things is very strong with Bush claiming that religion saved him from the bottle. In September 2002 Bush told a gathering of religious leaders: “Right now I should be in a bar in Texas, not in the Oval Office. There is only one reason I am in the Oval Office and not in a bar. I found faith. I found God. I am here because of the power of prayer.”<sup>28</sup> Another key moment in Bush’s life was in 1992 after Bill Clinton defeated his father. Laura Bush has remarked about her father-in-law’s defeat in 1992 that “as hard as it was on George and Jebbie – in a lot of ways it was the first time in their lives they were liberated from the shadow of their Dad.”<sup>29</sup> Within a year Bush had decided to run for the Governorship of Texas. He won, to the surprise of many including his father who, at the time, said he was “amazed, at how he’s gone.”<sup>30</sup> Reflecting on his emergence from his father’s shadow – and on their rivalry – Bush, when first running for Governor of Texas, rather bluntly said, “For the first time in our family, Dad knew he was not the center of attention.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Mitchell, p.139.

<sup>25</sup> Schweizer and Schweizer, pp. 255-256.

<sup>26</sup> Schweizer and Schweizer, p. 332.

<sup>27</sup> Bush, pp. 132-139.

<sup>28</sup> David Frum, *Right Man*, (Random House, 2003) p. 283.

<sup>29</sup> Podhoretz, p. 43.

<sup>30</sup> Podhoretz, p. 44; Schweizer and Schweizer, p. 44. George Snr’s surprise at his son’s success has continued. The analogy he used to explain his son’s election as president is revealing. “You remember when your kid came home with two A’s – and you thought she was going to fail. That’s exactly what it’s like” (Schweizer and Schweizer, p. 510). A couple of years before George W. Bush had become governor of Texas, his brother Marvin Bush had described him as “the family clown” (Schweizer and Schweizer, p.xi). It would seem his successes have not only surprised pundits, but also his own family.

<sup>31</sup> Minutaglio, p. 272.

“The Bombastic Bushkin”, as he was known amongst friends,<sup>32</sup> began to take life and himself more seriously in his early forties. Although often mistaken as his father,<sup>33</sup> Bush’s political style was his own. He cast himself as the “outsider populist,”<sup>34</sup> whereas his father had been one of the consummate establishment men of the twentieth century – great at networking but far from a natural campaigner. George W. has a much more natural talent than his father for the so-called “retail politics” or “grip-and-grin” of meeting constituents on the campaign trail.<sup>35</sup> Nixon, reflecting on George Bush Snr, once commented, “Bush despises campaigning. You can see it all over him. It’s not that he doesn’t like people; it’s just he isn’t very comfortable out there on the stump trying to connect with them. He tries too hard to be one of them, eating pork rinds and the rest, but he is not one of them, and it comes across.”<sup>36</sup> In contrast, George W.’s strength in opinion polling is that voters see him “as like them”, as someone they can relate to.<sup>37</sup> This difference is reflected in the political careers and election results of the two Bush presidents. For George Bush Snr, most of his political career was spent in appointed positions from Ambassador to the UN and China, Director of the CIA, to eight years as Vice President. His electoral record is decidedly mixed with losses in his two, and only, campaigns for the US Senate, in 1964 and 1970; and defeats on the presidential campaign trail in 1980 and 1992. To date George Bush Jnr has only been defeated in one election campaign – his 1978 bid for a US House of Representatives seat. Although his 2000 victory was far from convincing, it is worth noting that in 1998 he was re-elected Governor of Texas with 67 percent of the vote.

Another significant difference between father and son is George W.’s tendency to be much more open about the importance of his faith in his life and politics. The Bush family have traditionally been Episcopalians but Bush has converted to his wife’s Methodist faith.<sup>38</sup> Lastly, Bush’s presidential style is deliberately different to that of his father’s. John Podhoretz – a one time Bush Snr staffer – has argued that the 41<sup>st</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ronald Brownstein, “Doubts create a voter split over Bush”, *Los Angeles Times*, November 20, 2003; Eric Pooley (with S. C. Gwynne), “How George Got His Groove”, *Time*, June 21, 1999; Minutaglio p. 165;

<sup>33</sup> Minutaglio, p. 307

<sup>34</sup> Schweizer and Schweizer, p.463. Ivins and Dubose in *Shrub* question the credibility of Bush’s “populist” political image.

<sup>35</sup> Mitchell, p. 16.

<sup>36</sup> Monica Crowley, *Nixon off the Record* (Random House, 1996), p. 46.

<sup>37</sup> John Dickerson and Karen Tumulty, “Love him, hate him President”, *Time*, December 1, 2003.

<sup>38</sup> Coincidentally Jeb Bush has also converted to his wife’s faith, making him one of a growing number of Catholics in Florida.

president was “consumed by process...He disdained visionary programs and visionary ideas. He wandered all over the ideological map.”<sup>39</sup> Described more positively Bush Snr could be called a consensus politician and coalition builder, something most favourably remembered by foreign leaders in relation to his conduct during the 1991 Iraq war, which stands in stark contrast to his son’s inability to build a true coalition to fight the 2003 Iraq war. Podhoretz, who cares little about the opinions of foreigners – particularly the French<sup>40</sup> – offers a hagiographic defence of George W. Bush whom he sees as a visionary and a man of action,<sup>41</sup> and thus a far better president than Bush Snr.<sup>42</sup> The general shallowness of Podhoretz’s *Bush Country* is unlikely to lead to it changing many opinions. Nonetheless, the author represents an interesting strain of conservative opinion that sees George W. as a restoration of the Reagan era after a 12-year interregnum.

The 43<sup>rd</sup> president’s persona has regularly been seen as more similar to Ronald Reagan than his own father and undoubtedly the personalities and political styles of the two Bush presidents are different.<sup>43</sup> However, these differences should not allow the dynastic quality to Bush’s rise to power to be underplayed. Without his family’s name and the financial backing and support it accorded him within the Republican Party, it is very difficult to imagine George W. Bush reaching the US presidency. Despite a limited personal resume, Bush had the confidence to seek an electoral office at the age of 32 in 1978; being born into a political family automatically gave him that confidence and credibility that Bill Clinton spent his early life so consciously crafting. The biographical efforts to date on the power of the Bush dynasty have a variety of weaknesses. The Bushes wish to avoid talk of, or the image of, dynastic power<sup>44</sup> as such an image is unlikely to be politically popular; however, biographers seem a little too willing to take the Bushes on their word that they do not see political power as an entitlement. Mitchell’s biography – “W: Revenge of the Bush Dynasty” – contains largely cursory remarks about the Bush dynasty making the subtitle of her book rather misleading. The Schweizers start out with a couple of short chapters on Bush’s great-grandfather and also his grandfather Senator Prescott Bush, but the book is largely about the separate political and

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<sup>39</sup> Podhoretz, p. 46.

<sup>40</sup> Podhoretz in fact shows contempt for the political views of “Europeans” see p. 207.

<sup>41</sup> Podhoretz, pp. 203-217, 239-240, 241.

<sup>42</sup> Podhoretz, p. 46.

<sup>43</sup> Brendon O’Connor, “Back to the future, again”; Schweizer and Schweizer pp. 440, 463, 464, 484.

<sup>44</sup> Schweizer and Schweizer pp. 543-547; Minutaglio p. ix.

personal trajectories of Bush and his father. Minutaglio once again provides some interesting insights regarding the importance of longstanding family connections and traditions, but the historical details on Senator Prescott Bush and other leading family members are very limited.

One book that has taken the dynastic qualities of the Bush, Walker and Pierce (Barbara Bush's family) clans very seriously is Kevin Phillips' *American Dynasty*. At a first glance, *American Dynasty* seems to offer the first detailed examination of how Bush's beliefs and his success stem from the powerful business and political base his family has established over the last hundred years. However, Phillips' unceasing contempt for what he sees as the ill-gotten gains of Bush and his family undermines much of the solid evidence he has collected concerning the Bushes. This is unfortunate because Phillips, as a one-time wunderkind of the Republican Party and the mind behind Nixon's Southern Strategy in 1968, would seem well placed to write expansively about the Bush dynasty. Previous books by Phillips such as *The Emerging Republican Majority* and *Post-conservative America* display his uncanny knack for aptly describing electoral trends and voting groups – from his analysis of silk-stocking Republicans to Brownstone Democrats. More recently Phillip's journey from right to left<sup>45</sup> has seen him pen sprawling historical books, with *American Dynasty* in this latter oeuvre. Unfortunately, Phillips' liking for catchy labels and analogies serves him poorly here. His use of historical parallels in *American Dynasty* is often slipshod with the main aim of his historical references being to smear Bush by association any which way he can. Phillips too often overreaches in his case against the Bushes, the worst example being his Afterword which is entitled "Machiavelli and the American Dynastic Moment". This title and claims that: "As the 2004 presidential election took shape, another such Machiavellian moment was at hand"<sup>46</sup> and "the possibility that the United States could edge toward its own Machiavellian moment in the early-twenty-first century milieu of terrorism, neoimperialism, and dynastization is not far-fetched"<sup>47</sup> evoke the title of J. G. A. Pocock's classic *The Machiavellian Moment* (1975). However, Phillips shows little understanding of Pocock's argument that the birth of the American Republic was a "Machiavellian moment" instead using the term "Machiavellian moment" as though it implies a sinister turn in politics. Also his

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<sup>45</sup> Kevin Phillips, "Why I am no longer a conservative", *The American Conservative*, October 7, 2002.

<sup>46</sup> Phillips, *American Dynasty*, p. 320.

<sup>47</sup> Phillips, *American Dynasty*, p. 330.

understanding of the parallels between Bush and Machiavelli's arguments in *The Prince* overlooks the fact that Machiavelli's advice is to younger leaders who are not born to rule. The real inspiration for the connections seems to be that Bush's adviser Karl Rove and his late friend the Republican strategist Lee Atwater "were both devotees of Machiavelli and *The Prince*", something Phillips describes as "hardly a coincidence."<sup>48</sup>

Phillips' fallacious parallels are unfortunate as the power of the Bush dynasty and their misdeeds are important topics for investigation. However, this book is part of a pattern of how hatred leads to exaggerated claims and the journalistic equivalent of name-calling. Maintaining a healthy degree of objectivity when writing about the Bushes is undoubtedly challenging, something further underlined when looking at the importance of religion to George W. Bush.

### **The Evangelical Christian**

The other storyline that emerges from the early biographies and particularly from Bush's autobiography *A Charge to Keep* is the importance of Christianity in his life. Most of the biographies emphasise the strengthening of Bush's commitment to his evangelical faith set in motion in the summer of 1985 after a conversation with the Reverend Billy Graham. During the following year they spoke regularly as George W. "struggled with his drinking and professional career."<sup>49</sup> Of the current biographers, the Schweizers cover this issue and others relating to Bush's personal faith the most comprehensively, with Minutaglio's otherwise excellent biography offering little insight into the importance of religion in Bush's life. Future Bush biographers will hopefully explore this issue more intently as the story to date seems only partly told.

From the evidence we have, another important step for Bush towards a more focused life in 1985 was his increased involvement in the local Methodist church in Midland Texas, including attending a weekly "men's community Bible study" group.<sup>50</sup> The image of Bush and his fellow male west Texan parishioners poring over biblical readings<sup>51</sup> is

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<sup>48</sup> Phillips, *American Dynasty*, p. 321.

<sup>49</sup> Schweizer and Schweizer, p. 333.

<sup>50</sup> Bush, p. 137.

<sup>51</sup> Bush has continued to seek guidance from the bible. Lind writes, "Bush begins each day kneeling in prayer and studies a daily Bible lesson" (Michael Lind, *Made in Texas* (Basic Books, 2002) p. 109).

one that many of Bush's critics would find comic; this reflects a secular culture, as Wolfe<sup>52</sup> and others have argued, where evangelical Christians are often poorly regarded and poorly understood. Discussing evangelicals in a balanced manner is clearly difficult for many, with much of the commentary reminding one of H. L. Mencken's claims during the Scopes "monkey trial" that evangelicals and fundamentalists were "rustic ignoramuses," "anthropoid rabble," and "gaping primitives of the upland valleys." Such criticism tends to exaggerate the educational, regional and employment differences between evangelicals and non-evangelicals in today's America,<sup>53</sup> and does little to help people understand the appeal and power of evangelical Christianity. Not surprisingly, in this context, Bush's Christianity is the source of a great deal of scorn, particularly within Europe where the American religious style has long been seen as vulgar and sanctimonious.<sup>54</sup> Bush's religiosity, like his Texan style, is a lightning rod for many critics; this is unfortunate when these attacks are not connected to disagreements over substantive decisions or policies. This focus on individual character assassination reflects the unhealthy personalisation of much political debate.<sup>55</sup>

While acknowledging the above concerns about avoiding knee jerk prejudice, there are valid reasons to be concerned about how Bush projects his religious outlook into his politics.<sup>56</sup> The Schweizers, for instance, quote a relative of Bush's who states that "George sees this [the war on terrorism] as a religious war. He doesn't have a p.c. view of the war. His view of this is that they are trying to kill the Christians. And we the Christians will strike back with more force and more ferocity than they will ever know."<sup>57</sup> More concrete evidence of the impact of Bush's religious beliefs is his administration's promotion of faith-based social policy and his appointment of anti-abortion federal

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<sup>52</sup> Alan Wolfe, *The Transformation of American Religion* (Free Press, 2003).

<sup>53</sup> Claims that the Religious Right is more ignorant and backward seem questionable, given that "7% of evangelicals now perch in the \$75,000-a-year-and-up income bracket, and 6% hold advanced degrees, vs. 10% and 8%, respectively, in the general population. That's according to the most comprehensive recent survey of white evangelical Protestants" (Richard Kirkland, "Today's GOP: The Party's Over for Big Business." *Fortune*, February 6, 1995, pp. 43, 45). Other socioeconomic surveys have also concluded that religious fundamentalists differ little from the rest of the population, except obviously that they are more socially conservative; and much more likely to vote Republican than Democrat.

<sup>54</sup> O'Connor, "A Brief history of anti-Americanism".

<sup>55</sup> David Brooks has dubbed this "the presidential wars". David Brooks, "The Presidential Wars," *New York Times*, September 30, 2003.

<sup>56</sup> Phillips, *American Dynasty*, pp.216, 231, 233.

<sup>57</sup> Schweizer and Schweizer, p. 517.

judges.<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, the Bush administration's delegation to the 2002 U.N. Special Session on Children "objected to sex education for adolescents, tried to restrict information on sexually transmitted infections and contraception to heterosexual married couples, and fought to redefine 'reproductive health services' to exclude abortion."<sup>59</sup> They also objected to offering counselling to children in post-war situations, fearing that girls who had been raped could be offered abortions.<sup>60</sup> Such retrograde positions stem from the religious values of Bush and his administration, values that are shared by many Republicans and many Americans.<sup>61</sup> As backward as they might seem, such values need to be rebutted with serious arguments not condescension.

## The Texan

Bush likes to say: "I'm of Texas." The Lone Star roots this quote exemplifies are definitely part of Bush's own mythology. In 1992, asked how he differed from his father, he replied: "He attended Greenwich Country Day [a private New England school] and I went to San Jacinto High School in Midland [a Texas public school]."<sup>62</sup> Asked in 2000 to describe the difference between Gore and himself, Bush again played the populist schooling card saying he went to San Jacinto whereas Gore went to St. Albans, an elite private school in Washington D.C.<sup>63</sup> If the truth be told, Bush was born in New Haven Connecticut, and went to San Jacinto Junior High for only one year before attending an elite private school in Houston and then following in his father's path to Phillips Academy Andover – one of the most exclusive schools in America. Although the paths of the father and son have much in common, Bush's style and persona is far more genuinely Texan than his father's; something that is widely acknowledged in the Bush biographies. Minutaglio sees Bush's connections with Texas as so

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<sup>58</sup> O'Connor, *A Political History of the American Welfare System*, pp. 245-257; Ivins and Dubose, *Bushwhacked*, see chapter 13; Lind, p. 122.

<sup>59</sup> Ivins and Dubose, *Bushwhacked*, p. 260.

<sup>60</sup> Ivins and Dubose, *Bushwhacked*, p. 260.

<sup>61</sup> A recent report estimated that nearly 40% of Americans were white evangelical Christians, with up to 80% of these individuals being Republican supporters (see Julian Borger, "Faithful to George's gospel," *Guardian Weekly*, 9-15 July 2004). Borger's figures on evangelicals seem rather high with Anna Greenberg's and Jennifer Berkold's report "Evangelicals in America" for the PBS Religion and Ethics NewsWeekly putting the figure at 23% of Americans <<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week733/results.doc>> (2004).

<sup>62</sup> Ivins and Dubose, *Shrub*.

<sup>63</sup> Nicholas Lemann, *Sons: George W. Bush and Al Gore*, Redmond: Slate eBooks. <<http://slate.msn.com/ebooks/Sons%20George%20W.%20Bush%20and%20Al%20Gore.htm>> (2000).

fundamental that he suggests that his Bush “biography is meant to serve, in some way, as an introduction to and exploration of the place and state of mind called Texas.”<sup>64</sup>

Bush’s Texan credibility was cemented during the period he was the public face of the state-wide Major League Baseball team the *Texas Rangers* in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The baseball franchise generally improved its performance on and off the field during this time, allowing Bush to earn himself a substantial personal fortune<sup>65</sup> and thus establish himself as a Texan businessman.<sup>66</sup> Most of the biographers acknowledge that Bush’s personal style and identity, even when at college in New England, had been that of a Texan.<sup>67</sup> For instance as a student at Harvard he was noted for having Texan tastes from his music to his habit of sitting at the back of class chewing tobacco that he spat into a cup.<sup>68</sup> Bush’s association with the *Texas Rangers* and his widely accepted Texan persona meant that in the 1994 gubernatorial race, Bush was never successfully labelled a carpetbagger<sup>69</sup> – an out-of-state phoney – by his opponents as his father had been in his unsuccessful 1964 campaign for the US Senate.<sup>70</sup> During the campaign, Bush Snr’s Democrat opponent Ralph Yarborough was reported to have called him “a carpetbagger from Connecticut who is drilling oil for the Sheik of Kuwait.”<sup>71</sup>

In terms of his political style, George W. Bush’s claims to being a Texan seem reasonable; however, the more interesting question is what impact Texan political culture has had on Bush. The book that confronts this question most directly is Michael Lind’s *Made in Texas*. Lind takes political culture seriously and quite convincingly paints Bush as a product of the Texan Deep South. He contrasts the shaping

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<sup>64</sup> Minutaglio, p. ix.

<sup>65</sup> During his time as managing general partner of the *Texas Rangers*, Bush vastly increased his personal wealth. Minutaglio writes that within ten years he was to earn US\$14.9 million from his initial US\$606,000 investment (Minutaglio, p. 322). This financial windfall has been connected by a variety of commentators to the building of a new taxpayer funded stadium for the team in Arlington, Texas. See Joe Conason, “Notes on a Native Son: The George W. Bush Success Story”, *Harper’s Magazine*, February, 2000; Molly Ivins and Lou Dubose, *Shrub*.

<sup>66</sup> Schweizer and Schweizer, p. 387; Minutaglio, pp. 240, 241.

<sup>67</sup> Minutaglio, p. 290.

<sup>68</sup> Schweizer and Schweizer, p. 233.

<sup>69</sup> Bush was more successfully tagged a “carpetbagger” by the Democrats during his 1978 campaign in West Texas.

<sup>70</sup> Kevin Phillips writes: “George W. H. Bush’s own transition to Lone Stardom had definite rough patches. Biographers have recounted episodes such as how he was laughed at for wearing Bermuda shorts in Baptist West Texas and the advertising in one early campaign that featured him walking with a poodle straining at the leash” (Phillips *American Dynasty*, p. 137).

<sup>71</sup> Minutaglio, p. 82.

of Bush by this culture with the cultural impact the Texan German Hill Country had on another Texan, Lyndon Johnson. His analysis, although rather sweeping, is quite evocative. Unfortunately the latter chapters of *Made in Texas*, where Lind tries to show just how Bush is a product of the Protestantism, nativism and crony capitalism of the Texan Deep South, do not fulfil the book's early promise; the links Lind draws are often overstretched and attenuated. The failing of *Made in Texas*, rather like Phillips' *American Dynasty*, is that it pushes too hard in trying to connect too many misdeeds to Bush and his family. Lind, like Phillips, often attempts to damn Bush via the company he has kept, in short implying that Bush is guilty by association. However, at least Lind believes Texas is capable of producing good ideas and leaders, with Johnson generally promoted as the more humane brand of Texan politics; Phillips, on the other hand, depicts only the redneck stereotype of the state, contending that "Little about Texas has recommended it as a state from which to recruit the nation's cultural, economic, or governmental leadership."<sup>72</sup>

The unflattering image Phillips paints of Texas is of a state with one of the highest levels of income polarisation in the US, with compromised elected judges, with "world-class pollution problems" and with undermined worker rights.<sup>73</sup> Bush is blamed directly for the latter two policies. Ivins and Dubose, like Phillips, take a negative view of Bush's tenure as Texas governor in *Shrub*. They argue that as Governor, Bush – who received large campaign contributions from the oil industry and anti-worker compensation forces – appointed known defenders of industry to head the Environmental Protection Agency and the office of occupational health and safety. Further, Bush oversaw the establishment of voluntary industry compliance to pollution control regulations. Ivins and Dubose write that in Texas this political back scratching is described as: "You got to dance with them what brung you." This analysis of Bush brings us to a key charge against Bush: that of cronyism. Ivins and Dubose highlight a number of cases of cronyism in *Shrub* and their more recent *Bushwhacked*. The picture of a crony administration is also central to Paul Krugman's critique in *The Great Unravelling*. This is definitely an issue that deserves more serious attention, with the behaviour of the Bush administration likely to breathe new life into the analyses of neo-Marxist political economists.

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<sup>72</sup> Phillips *American Dynasty*, p. 111.

<sup>73</sup> Phillips *American Dynasty*, pp. 113, 116, 117, 118.

## Conclusion

There are undoubtedly other important elements to George W. Bush's background and political style that could have been explored by this paper. Furthermore, the themes discussed could have been interpreted either more critically or more favourably. As these caveats indicate, even a political figure considered by many as a "caricature" is more complex than popular commentary often suggests. To challenge this simplistic interpretation, I have drawn on the biographical literature to hopefully offer a more fulsome portrait of the current US president. In presenting this fuller picture, I am not arguing that Bush is a competent or effective president.<sup>74</sup> George W. Bush's rise to power poses important questions about the quality and fairness of the American democratic system. He has many faults and weaknesses as a politician, and it is because of concerns about his leadership that he is the source of much anger and often consequently much exaggeration. However political criticism that is too reliant on exaggeration and anger has dangers of its own with its tendencies to evoke prejudice, intolerance and false choices. Although Bush's own rhetoric, behaviour and solecisms do indeed invite satire and criticism, I contend that too regularly these attacks indulge in anti-American, anti-evangelical and anti-Texan stereotyping. Much of this is to be expected as part of the rough and tumble of partisan politics and I am certainly not advocating value-free or apolitical analysis – even if such a dubious idea was possible – but rather a need for more serious and more probing academic inquiry into the strengths and weaknesses of George W. Bush. The biographical literature seems an important starting point for such inquiry.

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<sup>74</sup> If Paul O'Neil's account is to be believed, the competence of the president has been found wanting on a range of issues. See Ron Suskind, *The Price of Loyalty* (Simon & Schuster, 2004) pp. 58, 80, 88, 97, 126-127, 148-149, 165-166.